



Compassion, Evangelism and the Comfort Dog Ministry

Editor's note: Professor Glenn Nielsen is on a partial sabbatical this year, maintaining his vicarage/internship responsibilities, but catching up on reading and writing occasional reflections on those readings. This is the eighth of [these reflections](#).

Last March a short post appeared, written by Rev. Roberto Rojas, criticizing the Lutheran Church Charities K-9 Comfort Dog ministry.¹ The piece starts with acknowledging that dogs are one of God's temporal blessings for this life. But then, based on the viewing of the news media accounts covering the Comfort Dogs work in Orlando following the tragic taking of so many lives at the Pulse Nightclub by a gunman, the charge is leveled at the ministry that all the attention was on the dogs and no witness was given to Christ and his work of salvation. The people interviewed by the television reporters are faulted for not immediately directing attention to Christ but instead spent time talking about the dogs.² Thus the dogs became an end in themselves and not a means to speaking of the eternal comfort from God. In the concluding paragraph, this statement appears: *Dogs do not speak God's Word; therefore, they provide no comfort.*

I am actively involved in the Comfort Dog ministry. My wife Sue and I are caregivers for LCC K-9 Comfort Dog Noah. We are both trained handlers who take Noah to a variety of places along with seven other handlers from our congregation: Timothy Lutheran Church in St. Louis, Missouri.³ I am also his schedule coordinator and do much of the administrative work of the ministry. In addition, I am the regional coordinator for the Missouri Valley region, which includes eight other congregations and three soon-to-be congregations with Comfort Dogs. I do this as part of my contribution to the life of our congregation and as a way to serve the community in which I live. I do all this as I carry out my regular Seminary responsibilities, and sometimes the two combine as I bring Noah to campus regularly. To say that I am committed to the Comfort Dog ministry would be accurate, perhaps even an understatement.



¹ Roberto Rojas, "The Failure of Comfort Dogs: All Dog, No God." Accessed at <http://steadfastlutherans.org/2017/03/the-failure-of-comfort-dogs-all-dog-no-god/>

² We have been on television with Noah five times. Three of those times were live but lasted just a few minutes. You have barely enough time to answer the questions about the dogs and where they go because the on air personality controls the questions. The focus is on the dogs during those short spots. Two times we had longer interviews where the reporter asked many questions and took quite a bit of footage. One time, the handler was explicit and mentioned numerous times why we were doing this, specifically mentioning Jesus. Both times, any mention of Jesus was edited out by the television producers. We were disappointed, but realized that the station had probably cut out the references to Jesus in order to "satisfy" the broadest segment of viewers and not run the risk of offending someone. Yes, we have tried, but we have learned you cannot rely on the major media outlets to air our witness to Christ for us.

³ Comfort Dogs are not owned by individuals but are placed in congregations and institutions, that have legal ownership of the dog. Those who handle the dogs (called handlers) receive training from LCC staff over three days and are the only people who take the dogs to events. The person who heads the ministry from the congregation or institution is called the Top Dog. The caregivers are those who kennel the dog at their house, take care of feeding and grooming, and often are responsible for getting the dog to church or to the handler who is taking the dog out for an event or visit. A variety of ministry helpers are also involved. One of our handlers has simply said that all the activity surrounding Noah Comfort Dog is one of the most intense ministries we have at our congregation.



However, the criticisms raised by the post have led me to reflect on the relationship of compassion and evangelism. Now this will not be a carefully researched article on this relationship with a variety of sources cited. Rather, it is a personal statement of what I see happening from inside. And I'll begin with a simple assertion: the dogs do bring comfort.

After the school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, *National Geographic* published an article on the healing power of dogs. The lead-in to the article was the work the LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs did there following that tragedy (work which continues to this day in the community and school), but then it explored why dogs can make such a difference. Here is one paragraph:

People also benefit from interacting with canines. Simply petting a dog can decrease levels of stress hormones, regulate breathing, and lower blood pressure. Research also has shown that petting releases oxytocin, a hormone associated with bonding and affection, in both the dog and the human.⁴



All of us in the ministry have seen this happen too many times to count. I have had Noah on campus here and three different times he has visited with one of the staff who had just lost their family dog due to old age or illness. To watch the tears flow while petting Noah while I simply listened to them talk about their pet gave me a peek inside to the benefit of just having Noah present at that moment. I can relate dozens of other such moments when people are dealing with some of the saddest moments in life: at a funeral visitation, in a hospital room, following a flood or tornado, after a church service, in a school classroom where a child has died, and in the home while a family was going through major issues. And I'm just one handler. The almost 100 dogs placed around the country, each with 6-12 handlers, could testify to the same thing: the dogs as dogs bring immense comfort to people in times of stress, grief, fear, sadness and hurt.⁵

Now Rev. Rojas acknowledged that at the beginning of his article, but then trivialized it by saying that this temporal comfort should not be confused with the eternal comfort given through Christ. In fact, by the end of the article, he dismisses this comfort because it is not the comfort given by the Gospel (since the dogs "do not speak God's Word, they provide no comfort"). I disagree. This comfort given by the dogs as dogs is incredibly important and is a wonderful gift from God for the everyday lives we live in God's created realm.

Since I have been working with Noah, I have come to the strong conviction that we need to read 2 Corinthians 1:3 in the fullest extent possible: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.* The little word that I have come to appreciate is "all." Our God is the God of all comfort, whether that comes through his created realm or through the Gospel of Christ crucified and risen. Whatever comfort people find is traced back to God, and he works in wonderfully diverse and powerful ways in addition to the most powerful and singular way of the salvation comfort provided in Jesus. We do well when we celebrate all the ways God works comfort in our lives, and do not pit them against each other in some sort of temporal/eternal comparison.

⁴ Amanda Fiegl, "The Healing Power of Dogs," in *National Geographic* (December 12, 2012). Accessed at <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2012/12/121221-comfort-dogs-newtown-tragedy-animal-therapy/>

⁵ The picture is Noah visiting a member of our congregation after a heart attack. The member has since been trained as a handler and takes Noah during the week when most of our other handlers are working



Indeed, for some, music is comfort on a downer of a day. The hug of a family member. The words of a supportive friend. The nourishment of food. The beauty of creation. The doctor who relieves our pain with an effective prescription. Now this brief list barely scratches the surface of God's created means for comforting hurting people, but I would certainly add to it how the specific attributes of dogs, especially those trained to be a calm, trusted presence like the LCC K-9 dogs are, testify that dogs are also God's gracious gift of comfort in our lives. In catechetical terms, we could go back to the Explanation of the First Article in the Small Catechism:

He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, spouse and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life...All this He does out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me.

We need comfort and consolation to support this body and life. God, out of grace and mercy as our loving Father, provides what we need when pain, sadness, and grief worms its way into our lives. He does so through his Word and the Gospel (Yes, indeed!), but he also does so through his providential care through so many created means. Both are gifts of grace and we do well to never diminish the created gifts even though they are temporary and limited compared to the eternal fullness of the resurrected life to come.⁶



Here I would also challenge Lutheran Church Charities. In the training my wife and I received from LCC, we heard the following statement: "It's not about the dogs!" On occasion we still hear that injunction from a staff member or read it in the literature. But I would say that on occasion it is indeed about the dogs. The dogs are part of God's way of being the God of all comfort. I would say that sometimes it is about the dogs, and I thank and praise God for them!

But it is not *just* about the dogs. The Comfort Dog ministry is so much more. It is also a means for us who take the dogs places to bring the mercy and compassion of Jesus Christ into people's lives. The metaphor of a bridge is often used. The dogs are a bridge for the handlers to listen and respond to people going through a difficult time. LCC explains it this way: The LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs are a bridge for compassionate ministry, opening doors for conversation about faith and creating opportunities to share the **mercy, compassion, presence, and proclamation** of Jesus Christ.

Here I would like to make a distinction between compassion and evangelism for the sake of this post. By evangelism I am referring to the specific witness of what Christ has done for us to redeem us from sin, death, and Satan. It involves bringing to bear on a conversation or a relationship, the message of Christ crucified and risen for the purpose of giving the Holy Spirit the opportunity to work in someone's life the faith needed through which salvation comes. Evangelism is the speaking/communicating of forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life given to those God declares righteous in his sight on account of Jesus and the promises which he has already fulfilled and will bring to completion on the last day.

⁶ The picture is of children returning to school for the first day after the flooding in Baton Rouge last August. They had been out of school for over a week. Most of these children lost everything in the floods. Noah was one of eight dogs there that week.



I will freely admit that most of the visits I have made, and I believe other Comfort Dog handlers have made, do not come to that place of evangelism. Instead, I would describe much of what the Comfort Dog ministry entails is the showing of compassion for people who are hurting or just appreciate the moments with the dogs and their handlers. It is giving compassion for the sake of being compassionate—and that is a good thing too. A very good thing.⁷



Compassion is being merciful even as the Father is merciful to us (Lk 6:36). It is doing what is good and helpful to the least of these—the hungry, sick, naked, thirsty, imprisoned, and stranger (Mt 26:35–36). It is praying for even an enemy (Lk. 28). It is displaying the fruit of the Spirit, such as kindness, goodness, gentleness, and patience, as part of our Christian lives because Christ has set us free to serve one another through love (Gal 6:1, 13, 22–23). It is loving our neighbor as ourselves (Lv 19:18; Mt 19:19; Rom 13:9). A statement by Martin Luther comes into play here: “A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.”⁸

Notice that these Scripture passages do not say compassion is a means to the end of evangelism. They are good things to do because our God wants us to care for our neighbor. It is part of our service to others and this world we live in. Compassion is a good end in itself. So I can take Noah somewhere and not have the opportunity to speak of Jesus but still walk away from that moment comfortable with the simple giving of compassion.

In fact, we react negatively when compassion is turned into a means to another end. Think of the homeless shelter that requires the people to listen to a sermon before a meal is served. The people who need compassion can see what is going on, the bait-and-switch maneuver. All too often, turning compassion into an instrument for evangelism creates bitterness or resistance from those who sense what’s going on.

It can happen in very subtle ways too. Many years ago I saw a bumper sticker with the old LCMS maroon color as background and white lettering that said: *Lutherans Care*. Now I suppose it could be read as an encouragement for Lutherans to care for others. But I suspect it was on that bumper as an advertisement. “Hey, we Lutherans care for you, come and visit us.” Notice what has just happened though. Christian care has become a commodity used to attract people. It’s been made an instrument for some other purpose, when, instead, we are to simply care for others because our Lord has called us to do that. It can be a good goal in and of itself.

The Comfort Dog ministry offers compassion in many ways, but here are five key times when I’ve seen it as a handler. Notice here we are not talking about the dog as a dog, but now as the bridge for the handler to show compassion.

1. A quiet presence and listening ears. In the moments of grief, loss, fear, and sadness, people need someone to listen to them. They have stories to tell. They want someone they can trust to hear them out non-judgmentally and supportively. A number of our handlers took Noah to St. Paul’s High School in Concordia, Missouri, in May 2016 after two seniors drowned on their class trip. At least 10 dogs were there over a period of many days. Classmates came in to hug on the dogs, and the handlers became the listening ears as the students would tell where they were and what happened. Here is a picture of two girls, on either side of Noah, holding each other’s hands on top of Noah’s side. It was a moment of silence, but surrounded by tears and voices as handlers just listened to the students. Those are powerful moments of compassion.



⁸ I accessed this online at: <http://www.prayingthegospels.com/rare-quotes-by-martin-luther/short-quotes-martin-luther/>. While doing so, I came across this quotation about dogs: “The dog is the most faithful of animals and would be much esteemed were it not so common. Our Lord God has made His greatest gifts the commonest.”



2. Paying attention. Like the listening ear, this involves giving time and energy to pay attention to someone who is lonely or feeling left out or in need of a smile. The dogs are often in nursing homes, at shut-in calls, in schools and just out and about in stores. We know not to plan for quick visits as walking down a hospital hallway to visit one person ends with being stopped numerous times for someone to pet Noah and even to be invited into another room. The nurses and medical staff also ask to pet Noah. We take Noah to Sam's Club with us as part of his continued training. The people who give out samples know him by name as does the pharmacist. People with children stop us as we walk down the aisles. Those are powerful moments of compassion.

3. Visiting the least of these. We take Noah to adult day-care centers. He goes to a cerebral palsy day-care center. These are people who cannot stay by themselves. They sit all day in a care center. Many are in wheelchairs. Most have limited mental capabilities. While they are not forgotten, they are not living the "full life" Americans so treasure. But when Noah comes, he is greeted with a cheer. They do a special project to give him a present. They love Noah. Why? He rests his head on their laps so they can pet him or so the handler can take their hands and help them pet him. They get to play hide and seek with Noah; they hide his ball and then he comes in and has to find it. Handlers bring the dogs to hospice patients, to lonely seniors in assisted living quarters, to our special communion service luncheon for those who can't get to church on Sunday but still want communion at church (fourth Tuesday of the month). Those are powerful moments of compassion.



4. Giving hugs. Sometimes people just need a hug or someone to share a tear with them. With Noah by our side at a funeral visitation, these moments of shared grief lead to the comfort that physical touch gives. Certainly, a funeral visitation leads to hugs, but something is added with a dog there. A few weeks ago we received a request from someone in Texas to go to a funeral visitation here in St. Louis. The family members did not belong to our church, but three dogs (Tabby, Esther, and Noah) shared the four-hour visitation. We didn't know the family members, but the dogs opened up the opportunity to express sympathy with more than words. Those are powerful moments of compassion.

5. Prayer. When the opportunity presents itself, we ask if we can pray with the people we are visiting. One of our handlers is a cancer survivor and she takes Noah almost every week to the cancer treatment floor at St. Mary's Hospital near Concordia Seminary. Diane is adept at offering a prayer for the person as Noah sits by the person's side or even lies on the bed with the patient. She can walk down the hallway and someone will stop her and in five minutes she is offering up a prayer. On occasion I have taken Noah to a deployment after some tragedy or disaster. One of the staff at LCC, Rich, listens to someone, tells about the dogs, then listens some more, and easily and comfortably says that this is a praying ministry and asks if he could pray for the person. He doesn't get turned down (neither have we when we've asked). We gather in the home of someone after a tornado, and Rich leads us all with bowed heads in prayer. These are typically not evangelistic prayers, but words of trust in our caring God and for his help for the people who are hurting.⁹ Those are incredibly powerful moments of compassion.



⁹ The picture is following the prayer I had with Ernie in an assisted living facility. He is in his late nineties and lost his wife about a year ago. After the prayer was finished I looked down and this was what I saw.



Each of these situations for compassion arise because of a Comfort Dog who has opened the door for the handler to provide comfort, care, kindness, patience, goodness, mercy, love, and gentleness to those in need, including the least of those in our society. The dogs provide a bridge for the compassion to be extended to the neighbor through a faithful follower of Jesus. That compassion is a good thing. It is good to show compassion in such situation.

However, on occasion the opportunity comes to witness to Jesus and his salvation. An evangelism moment arises and the handlers can speak the Gospel to someone who may not believe. What a joyous time that is indeed! While a dog can bring comfort as one of God's creatures, and while showing compassion is itself a valuable gift to someone, we also are hopeful that a visit can lead to more. Yes, sometimes the showing of compassion allows for us to bring the presence and proclamation of Jesus into the situation. And we want to walk through that door that the Lord has opened through the Comfort Dog ministry. I've seen that in three key ways.

1. When the dogs visit someone regularly, a relationship develops—not just with the person needing comfort but also with the staff or caregivers of the person. Perhaps it is a question of why we are doing this ministry, and we can speak of how Jesus's compassion for us leads us to show compassion. Perhaps it comes up in the conversation about how our church sponsors this ministry and we can speak about what we believe about Jesus. At our congregation, we have the following mission statement for Noah Comfort Dog ministry: *Touched by God's grace, Timothy's Noah Comfort Dog Ministry shows care and compassion, with Noah as the bridge, to connect people to Jesus.* Happily, sometimes we are able to connect the person to Jesus in an evangelistic way.

2. Occasionally, a visit produces a sacred moment where the Gospel can be shared. Last August I took Noah to Baton Rouge after the flooding destroyed so much of Louisiana. Seven other dogs were there. We stopped for lunch at Chick-Fil-A, and the restaurant was crowded. When we walked in with the dogs, everyone watched. Some came up and talked with us. As I was leaving with Noah, I noticed an older couple, possibly in their sixties sitting with a woman in her late forties. I could see them looking at Noah so I stopped to talk. The mother began to pet Noah and soon opened to me, a total stranger, about how they lost everything in their house. The younger woman was their daughter from Texas who had come to help them. While the mother and I talked, the daughter broke down in tears and excused herself to go to the bathroom. The conversation moved to talk about Noah and then the daughter came back. The moment seemed right and I spoke of Jesus to them. I closed with a prayer that spoke of the saving love of Jesus on the cross and resurrection. I would guess it was about 10 minutes, while the other dogs and handlers were waiting in the parking lots and also meeting people going in and out. But for me time stood still, and the tears in their eyes became a sacred moment of witness to Jesus in a horrible situation for this family.

3. By far the most common opportunities for evangelism happen on the dogs' Facebook pages. Each dog has a business card that we give out freely.¹⁰ On the back is the church's name and the Facebook page. You can check out Noah's Facebook page at **Noah Comfort Dog**. He has 2700 people who have liked his page. Each post is usually seen by 1000 to 1200 people, with some posts going beyond 2000 views. Some of the dogs have many

10

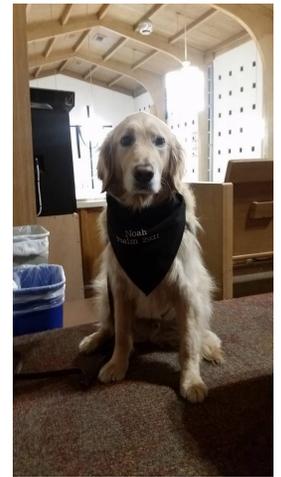




concordiatheology

COMMENTARY, CONVERSATION, AND RESOURCES FOR LIFE AND MINISTRY TODAY

more followers than Noah. Now some posts are fun, with Noah being a dog. Many tell of what he did that day. But regularly we put up a post that clearly speaks the Gospel. The posts are written as if Noah were speaking. For example, on Good Friday we put up these pictures with this comment: **Tonight I was at our Good Friday service. I greeted people with a smile because what Jesus did was so good for everyone. But during the service we got sad and somber because of all Jesus had to suffer. So the church was draped in black and I wore my black bandanna. As the church got darker, it became a holy time for us to wonder about God's great love for us and how He gave His only Son to save this sinful world. Amazing love!**



On Easter morning, we put up these pictures underneath this comment: **This morning I'm at the Easter services. The church looks glorious with white all around. So I have my Easter bandanna on with my Bible verse: Jesus lives to give strength and peace to His people. What joyous news! After the service I went up front and just had to smile on this day of resurrection hope.**



The opportunity to speak the Gospel through through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other social media occurs regularly. Not every time, but often enough that those who follow Noah have read of Jesus and His saving work.



concordiatheology

COMMENTARY, CONVERSATION, AND RESOURCES FOR LIFE AND MINISTRY TODAY



One more post I'd like to share was one in front of St. Mary's Hospital after Diane had visited the cancer patients. The comment over the picture was: **I regularly go to St. Mary's Hospital and visit people undergoing cancer treatments. Here I am in front of the hospital showing why we make these visits. It's to open up the doors for my handlers to bring the mercy, compassion and presence of Jesus to those struggling with such a terrible disease. Please pray for those I visited this week.**

This time I would like you to see the comment that someone made about this Facebook post.



I've appreciated the opportunity to reflect on my work with LCC K-9 Comfort Dog Noah. Remember—these moments, visits, occasions are multiplied by thousands each week as hundreds of handlers take almost a hundred dogs out regularly (and more dogs are coming!). A dog may not be able to speak God's Word, but these Comfort Dogs do bring comfort. As part of God's creation by which He is the God of all comfort, as the bridge for bringing compassion through their handlers, and as joyous opportunities present themselves to share the glorious news of Christ's salvation won for us.



Glenn Nielsen is professor of practical theology and director of vicarage and deaconess internships at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.